The Report committee for Rebecca Pertida Lammons
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Cultural Identity and L2 Accent: A Literature Review

APPROVED BY
SUPERVISING COMMITTEE

Supervisor:_____
Elaine K. Horwitz

_____
Thomas Garza

Cultural Identity and L2 Accent: A Literature Review

By

Rebecca Pertida Lammons, B.A.

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Cultural Identity and L2 Accent: A Literature Review

By

Rebecca Pertida Lammons, M.A.

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SUPERVISOR: Elaine K. Horwitz

The issue of identity has generated a significant amount of research in recent years. In this literature review, the relationship between learner identity and accent is explored, specifically the learner's cultural affiliation and identity and the link to his/her accent acquisition in a second or foreign language. Social networks, motivation, L1 use, socio-cultural knowledge, discrimination and power relations, and anxiety are all shown to affect parts of the learner's cultural identity, which, in turn, may influence his/her accent in the L2.

Table of Contents

Introduction

The relationship between second or foreign language learners and culture has been the subject of many studies. In 1978, Schumann introduced his Social Distance Hypothesis, in which he posited that learners' degree of assimilation (when the learner renounces his/her lifestyle and cultural values in order to adopt those of the L2 culture) and acculturation (when the learner adapts some of the values and behavior of the L2 culture but maintains his/her L1 cultural behavior when in the presence of other L1 members) affect their mastery of the L2 (Horwitz, 2006). The connection between learner success in the L2 and cultural identity continues to be researched today; there is now a wealth of literature about the concept of identity and socio-cultural constructions.

Identity is currently conceived as multiple and dynamic (Marx, 2002, p. 266) rather than static and unchangeable. In one study on bilinguals, Spanish-English bilinguals were found to have more exaggerated personality traits in one language than in the other (Ramírez-Esparza, Gosling, Benet-Martínez, Potter, & Pennebaker, 2006, pg. 115). When using different languages, their personalities seemed to change. In a different analysis of identity by Zukowski-Faust (1997), an American who had lived in Brazil claimed that in Portuguese he was "wild, untamed, happy, alive, laughing, and ignorant of life's troubles," while in English he was simply "boring" (Informal Queries section, para. 4). Both the bilinguals' and the American man's personalities in each language were only a part of their "repertoire of social identities," which allowed them to affiliate with different groups at different times (Saville-Troike, 1989, as cited in Sterling, 2000). Their social identities gave them the opportunity to engage in different communities.

Identity, when seen as part of a larger social context, becomes partly dependent on factors external to the individual. These factors could include ethnic group affiliation, in which a person feels that he/she belongs to his/her "ethnolinguistic group" (Gatbonton, Magid, & Trofimovich, 2005, p. 492), and which could be taken to be part of a "shared social identity" (Gatbonton & Hinenoya, 2000, p. 226). This type of identity refers to having shared culture, knowledge, and manners of speaking (p. 226). In the aforementioned bilinguals study, the participants' personality traits in each language were seen as integral to the culture of each language (Ramírez-Esparza, et al., 2006, p. 115). In other words, they adapted their identities to the culture that they affiliated with each language.

Language plays a key role in identity, as the speaker is seen as a member of the language group "so long as the [linguistic] choice…is recognized as normal for a group" when the opposite occurs, the speaker is seen as an outsider (Brown and Gilman, 1960, as cited in Sterling, 2000). Similarly, Pavlenko and Blackledge (2004) suggest that verbal communication can be adjusted depending on the social context (as cited in Gatbonton, et al., 2005, p. 507); therefore, language can be seen as a type of pass that allows a person into different communities. Nevertheless, Awad El Karim M. Ibrahim (1999) suggests that a person's social identity is a performance using nonverbal communication (i.e., way of dressing) (p. 350), since language is not the only indicator of community membership. Thus, identity can include cultural knowledge and practices as well as language use and nonverbal manners of communicating.

Because identity is so fluid and also so strongly connected to social context, it would seem logical that there might be a relationship between a person's identity and

his/her mastery of a second or foreign language. Gardner asserts that learning a second language is a "social psychological phenomenon" due to the necessity of the learner to develop communication skills with a different cultural community (Gardner, 1998, as cited in Orisinilandari, 2005, Introduction section, para. 1). For some students, learning such communication skills could imply losing some of their original cultural identity (Horwitz, 2009, p. 67), and they may feel uncomfortable using their L2 because they cannot "express their individuality in the new language or are required to employ 'strange' cultural behaviors" (p. 60). The L2 may seem to alienate them from their L1 cultural practices and identity. For other students, learning an L2 might constitute an opportunity to form a new identity as a participant in a different community (Marx, 2002, p. 267); language use gives the learner the chance to "reflect, reaffirm, negogiate, or reconstruct" his/her cultural identity (Gatbonton, et al., 2000, p. 492).

However, not all language learners have the same ability or desire to engage in changing their identities. Guiora asserts that adult language learners have "egos," or identities, whose boundaries vary in their "permeability"; some adults simply "cannot bear" to have more than one identity. In Guiora's view, this identity flexibility affects pronunciation; since pronunciation is central to a person's language ego, his/her ability to develop new identities (his/her level of ego permeability) greatly affects his/her pronunciation achievements in the L2 (Guiora, 1990, as cited in Abu-Rabia & Kehat, 2004, p. 85). Though many studies have focused on the relationship learners have with their L2 identities, relatively few have specifically investigated the link between identity and L2 accent. If language and ways of communication are considered a part of ethnic

group affiliation and therefore, a part of a person's social and cultural identity, then a person's accent in the L2 could be influenced by his/her identity.

When considering L2 pronunciation, studies have shown that the L2 learner typically acquires a pronunciation that falls between that of the first and second languages. Beyond the age of three, the learner is aware that he/she is learning two languages (Flege, 1981, p. 449) and "interprets sounds of a foreign language in terms of phonological categories of the native language (p. 451), and when the L2 sounds are distinct from those of the L1, the learner resorts to their closest equivalents in the L1 (Meskhi, 2002, p. 31). Eventually, the learner may come to have a "Reference Sound Group," which is a set of sounds culled from both the L1 and the L2 that represent the basis for L2 pronunciation (p. 35), or a type of perceptual "target" which they must reach (Flege, 1995, in Reeder, 1998, p. 103). This sound group is modified as the learner's knowledge of the L1 and the L2 changes; similarly, the learner modifies his/her "gestural representations," or form of the mouth when speaking, until he/she produces an L2 accent that complies with his/her target pronunciation (Borden, 1980, in Reeder, 1998, p. 103). Hence, the learner's pronunciation is changeable (Meskhi, 2002, p. 35). He/she may develop an accent that ranges from native-like to very distinctly foreign.

A foreign accent in an L2 is defined by Flege, Munro, and Mackay (1995) and Derwing (1998) as "the extent to which non-native speech is perceived to differ from a native speaker norm" (as cited in McGregor, 2007, p. 31). The native speaker who creates this norm is someone to whom the language belongs "through heritage and expertise," that is, someone who grew up (from birth) hearing and using the language, and who has extensive experience with it (Piller, 2002, p. 181). The idea that L2 learners can reach a

level in which their language use rivals that of a native speaker has been debated for some time. Many researchers have centered their studies around the Critical Period Hypothesis, but that is outside the scope of this paper.

Regardless of the existence of a critical period, L2 learners do exist who have been labeled “native-like” speakers. Native-like speakers can be defined in three ways, according to Abrahamsson and Hyltenstam (2009): a) they are native-like because they have identified themselves as so, b) they are perceived as native-like by listeners, and c) they are native-like in their linguistic behavior (p. 259). When the issue at hand is a foreign accent, the most relevant definition of native-like is then that of being perceived as such by listeners. Abrahamsson and Hyltenstam point out that there is not much purpose to rating L2 users on a scale of “native-like” to “non-native” because the distinction is, in fact, binary: one is either identifiable as a non-native, or one is not, just as there is no degree of being married or being dead (p. 267).

Being identified by listeners as native-like often means that the L2 user in question can “pass;” that is, in some situations, he/she may be thought to have the same status as a native speaker of his/her L2 (Piller, 2002, p. 181). The act of passing (or attempting to) could, at times, be conscious on the part of the L2 user (p. 194-195), depending on the social context. If passing is part of a social performance, then it could be related to the L2 learner’s cultural affiliation/identity, as he/she might modify his/her language use in different social situations. This paper explores the relationship between the extent of the L2 user’s affiliation with the L2 culture (his/her cultural identity) and the strength of the L2 user’s accent, defined here as the ability to pass (or not) as a native speaker of the L2.

Rationale

When analyzing the connection between language learning and cultural context, there are several reasons to think that cultural identification may influence accent acquisition. Guiora compared the development of an identity in the L2 to taking on another personality (Merrill Valdés, 1986, p. 26), since he hypothesized that "…Figures of speech in different languages offer alternative ways to conceptualize, to express, and perhaps to experience similar events, thus creating the possibility of a shared universe which is not readily accessible to speakers of other languages" (Guiora, 1983, p. 229). In learning an L2, the learner may begin to take part in the "shared universe" of the L2 culture, which may include conceptualizing the world in a novel or unexpected way. Acquiring an L2 can imply "constantly organizing and reorganizing" one's identity and place in the world (Norton, 2001, p. 166).

However, new identities can also bring new experiences and even advantages to the learner. Part of forming a different identity can involve acquiring a native-like accent in the L2. As Gatbonton and Hinenoya (2000) asserted, listeners interpret accent as an indication of cultural loyalty; hence, if the learner develops a native-like L2 accent, he/she may be taken for a member of the L2 community, which might give him/her "access to the privileges" of the L2 native speakers (Norton, 2001, p. 166). By passing as a native speaker, the L2 user may be able to experience new opportunities not otherwise available to him/her.

It is often assumed that L2 users prefer to pass because of the benefits they receive via the language (Skapoulli, 2004, p. 246-247). In passing, the L2 user takes part in the phenomenon of convergence, which is "a linguistic strategy whereby individuals

adapt to each other's speech" by changing their speech rates, pronunciation, and pauses, among other aspects (Thakerar, Giles, Cheshire, 1982, as cited in Gass & Selinker, 2001, p. 230). However, some learners choose not to take part in the L2 culture and community; these learners experience divergence, a process involving the accentuation of "vocal differences between themselves and others" (p. 230). They do this in order to distinguish themselves from other groups or speakers (LePage and Tabouret-Keller, 1985, as cited in Walters, 1996, p. 519), creating distance. One language feature which a speaker might use to differentiate him/herself from others is accent; an accent can identify a person as coming from another country, region, social network, or even social class.

Some learners may choose not to identify with the L2 community or culture because they feel a "fear of assimilation," or the fear that they will lose their L1 identities and membership in the L1 community upon acquiring the L2 (MacIntyre, Dörnyei, Clément, & Noels, 1998, p. 552). Though becoming a member of an L2 community may bring benefits, some learners might feel that there are more advantages to be had in their own L1 communities, and that the cons of becoming proficient in an L2 outweigh the pros. It is likely that these learners also lack integrative motivation, or the desire to learn a language in order to participate in the L2 culture (Cook, 2001, p. 114). Likewise, they may be inhibited by the affective filter: if they feel negatively about the L2, its culture, or people, they might not effectively process the language input, leading to a lack of efficient acquisition (Gass & Selinker, 2001, p. 201). The affective filter could also influence which parts of the language the learner gives attention to, and in what order (Dulay, Burt, & Krashen, 1982, as cited in Gass & Selinker, 2001, p. 205).

In that case, accent may not be given much attention by the learner with negative

feelings towards the L2 culture. Alternately, the learner could consciously choose to express his/her differences from the L2 speakers and community via a nonstandard accent. In either case, the learner could use accent as an identity marker, and as such, his/her accent in the L2 could be influenced by his/her identification with the L2 culture and community.

In the following sections of the report, several different perspectives on the development of second language accents and identities will be discussed: the relationship between motivation, identity, and accent; how socio-cultural knowledge can affect the learner's L2 accent; the effects of the learner's L1 use on his/her L2 accent; how the learner's social networks might influence the development of his/her L2 accent; how anxiety might affect the learner's L2 accent acquisition; and finally, the relationship between power relations, discrimination, and the learner's L2 accent. Each of these concepts is shown to be potentially linked to learner identity, and, in turn, accent.

Motivation, Identity, and Accent

In a study which examined the phenomenon of passing as a native speaker, Piller (2002) collected data from bilingual couples from 1997 to 1999. One of the partners spoke English as his/her first language, and the other German. In their conversations with their partners, the learners discussed their ability to pass as native speakers and also their second language education. Many of the participants distinguished between beginning to study and "'really beginning"' to learn the L2, suggesting that their learning became more important to them once they "took charge of their own learning" (Piller, 2002, p. 191). In this regard, integrative motivation may have played a role in the learners' acquisition of native-like accents. The learners in this study were married to people who spoke their L2; thus, part of their motivation may have stemmed from their desire to “belong” to the cultural group of their spouses. Since ethnic identity also constitutes language (Gatbonton, et al., 2005, p. 507), these L2 learners may have found integrative motivation via their desire to become affiliated with their partners’ ethnic group through language proficiency. If passing involves being perceived as a member of the L2 ethnic group, then these learners achieved ethnic group affiliation by acquiring native-like accents.

In another study, the author, Marx (2002), analyzed her own experiences as a learner and user of her L2, German, in the context of her C2, German culture. Marx, who is Canadian, consciously tried to avoid an immediately identifiable foreign accent in her German, particularly because she was often thought to be American, which was bothersome to her. After about a year, she began to be able to pass as a German native speaker during "brief conversations with strangers" (Marx, 2002, p. 272). In this case, as a learner, she was experiencing a simultaneous case of divergence and integrative

motivation, in which she desired to become a part of the L2 culture, yet part of her motivation in doing this was avoiding cultural identification with another group (Americans). This conscious effort at differentiating herself from one cultural group and trying to integrate into another is what, in her opinion, led to her acquisition of a native-like accent.

In another case of divergence, the same author, upon her return to Canada, found that her English had become accented, and she felt this was due to her possession of a new identity which she marked with a new accent. She asserted that having a foreign accent in both the L1 and the L2 reflects "the omnipresent foreign aspects of our selves and our identities" (Marx, 2002, p. 278). Because she wanted to express these novel aspects of her identity and in doing so, distinguish herself from other Canadians, she was again experiencing divergence, which may be considered as opposite to integrative motivation. She manipulated her accent to express affiliation with one cultural group and disassociation from another; through her pronunciation, she was able to suppress one of her identities and highlight a different one (Gatbonton, et al., p. 492). Just as happened in Germany when she tried to extricate herself from the stamp of appearing American, in Canada her English accent changed as a result of her identification, or non-identification, with the culture.

Socio-cultural Knowledge and Accent

A learner's development of a native-like L2 accent may be due in some part to the learner's knowledge of the L2 culture. In Piller's study (2002), some of the participants had incorporated regional features of their L2 into their L2 accent. In other words, they chose the most salient aspects of a certain dialect of their L2 and began to speak using those characteristics. Likewise, in Lybeck's study (2002) of American speakers of Norwegian, the participants' accents were evaluated partly in terms of how often they used American *r*, which the author considered to be "highly marked" and which "immediately identifies its speaker" (p.183).

The fact that some L2 speakers used well-known features of an L2 dialect to pass, and that one study author used a similar feature of American English as a marker of accent, indicates that a learner's knowledge of (or lack of awareness about) the connotations of different L2 accents in the L2 culture may help or hinder their ability to pass. As Piller notes, L2 users may sometimes "strategically employ stereotypical features" of the L2 as a way to pass (p. 193), implying that the L2 user must have socio-cultural knowledge with regards to L2 dialects and pronunciation (p. 200).

This type of knowledge is usually not readily accessible to a full extent in books, classrooms, or other traditional learning settings. Logically, an L2 learner might acquire working socio-cultural knowledge by participating in the L2 culture; to do so, and also acquire knowledge about the L2 culture, society, language variants, and their connotations, would require some willingness on the part of the learner. This willingness might be fostered by integrative motivation and positive feelings towards the L2 people and culture, which would prevent the affective filter from blocking any learning.

Therefore, a learner's knowledge of L2 variants and their socio-cultural implications, and, in turn, their accent development, may be dependent on the learner's identification and affiliation with the L2 culture.

L1 Use and L2 Accent

A study by Abu-Rabia and Kehat found that the amount of use of the L1 and the L2 influenced the learners' accents (2004). A high “degree of activation” of the L1 affected strength of foreign accent in the L2 (Flege, Frieda, & Nozawa, 1997, as cited in Abu-Rabia & Kehat, 2004, p. 86). The results indicated that "whenever the amount of L1 use was relatively high, a foreign accent could be detected" (Abu-Rabia & Kehat, 2004, p. 95). The result that frequent L1 use could contribute negatively to development of the L2 accent could imply that strong identification with the L1 culture (of which the L1 is part) may inhibit the learner’s progress in the L2. As Ibrahim noted, when learners enter a new socio-cultural situation, they must choose a group in which they fit, and deciding which language to use is a necessary choice in that task (Ibrahim, 1999, p. 353). Furthermore, since language learners experience social pressure from both the L1 and L2 culture groups, they must "constantly renegotiate their identities" (Gatbonton, et al., p. 492). Thus, using the L1 represents a choice, and one which favors membership in the L1 culture more than in the L2 culture. Because of this, the study results could be seen as indirectly supporting a link between cultural identification and L2 accent formation.

In a study on ESL learners’ perceptions of their accents, Derwing found that most of the participants were interested in achieving a native-like L2 accent. They stated that doing so would not cause them to feel as if they were losing a part of their L1 identity (2003). While these findings would seem to contradict the idea that acquiring a native-like L2 accent represents an identity issue (in terms of also acquiring membership in the L2 community), the author did highlight the fact that these learners all continued to maintain their L1s. They spoke them with their families and within their ethnic

communities on a regular basis (2003, p.560-561), suggesting that the reason they did not feel threatened by the thought of taking on an L2 identity is because they had never left behind their original L1 identities. However, one might question how effectively these learners would then acquire an L2 accent if Abu-Rabia's and Kehat's findings indicate that continued L1 use negatively affects L2 accent. The learners might have to relinquish some of their L1 use and identity in order to construct a new (and differently accented) persona in the L2.

Social Networks and L2 Accent

Social networks, as part of the L2 cultural community, may have a strong influence on the learner's L2 accent. Social network theory delineates three types of social networks: exchange networks, which include family and close friends; interactive networks (acquaintances), and passive networks, which include relationships that are physically distant (Milroy, 1992, as cited in Lybeck, 2002, p. 176). Exchange networks influence the learner in terms of social and linguistic norms; a member of an exchange network will behave, linguistically, like the other members (p. 176). Similarly, social networks can aid in socialization, which teaches social norms and conveys the community's culture to the learner (Sterling, 2000).

In a study on Americans in Norway, those Americans who had exchange networks and who were most successful in their overall acculturation patterns (as indicated by positive feelings towards Norwegians and L2 use) had the "highest pronunciation accuracy" and used the Norwegian *r* (as opposed to the noticeable American *r*) "almost exclusively" (Lybeck, 2002, p. 183). By developing membership in a Norwegian exchange network (which can be considered a cultural group), the learners were able to improve their L2 accents.

On the other hand, one of the participants who expressed dissatisfaction with her Norwegian social contacts actually regressed in her pronunciation; she had entered the study with a weaker foreign accent than the one she had when she left the study (p. 183). In the absence of an exchange network and its accompanying social influences, she felt unaffiliated with the culture and was unable to improve or even maintain her L2 pronunciation. In this case, the learner was lacking, in Guiora's terms, the ego

permeability necessary to “partially and temporarily give up” her “separateness of identity” (Guiora, et al., 1972, p. 422).

The presence or absence of a social network is therefore likely a key element in acquiring a native-like accent, as is the learner’s identity. If the learner has no positive feelings towards the L2 community nor feels any need to affiliate with it, the development of a solid social network would, logically, be rather difficult. Marx defines identity formation as involving both learning and becoming a member of a community (becoming a participant) (2002, p. 267); if learners neglect to participate in the L2 community, their L2 social network will likewise remain undeveloped. Learners who are not open to adapting their identities to a new community will likely never become part of that community, and consequently, their lack of social contacts will hinder them in acquiring a native-like accent in the L2, as they will have opportunities neither for practice nor cultural socialization.

Anxiety and L2 Accent

Anxiety in a social context is taken as something that "inhibits behavior" and may lead to "disengagement—avoidance of social situations, withholding of communication…" (Geen, 1991, as cited in Gass & Selinker, 2001, p. 357). High anxiety can also result in the learner paying attention only to the form (such as grammar and syntax) of what he/she is saying rather than the meaning (Hoffman, 1986, as cited in Gass & Selinker, 2001, p. 358), implying that the learner's anxiety negatively affects his/her "concentration on meaningful use of language" (Gass & Selinker, 2001, p. 358). Both the learner's social disengagement and lack of focus on meaningfully using his/her L2 could lead to a reduced or nonexistent L2 social network. If the learner does not participate in the L2 community or communicate in a purposeful way, he/she might have difficulty in establishing an L2 social network. Consequently, social anxiety could negatively affect the learner's acquisition of a native-like L2 accent.

On the other hand, anxiety may not completely inhibit the learner in acquiring a native-like accent. In her study on passing, Piller found that passing or very high achievement in the L2 may be "audience-specific" in so far as certain participants in the study stated that they could only pass as native speakers when interacting with particular people, such as a significant other (2002, p.197). This may be related to language anxiety; if the learners felt nervous or uncomfortable in certain situations, they may not have been able to concentrate on their L2 speech to the degree that they could pass as native speakers. As Hoffman suggests, their anxiety may have caused them to focus more on one aspect of their speech, such as their correct use of grammar, but not pronunciation; or, on the other hand, they might have had great emotional investment in

the social interaction and consequently paid less attention to pronunciation accuracy (Eisenstein & Starbuck, 1989, as cited in Gass & Selinker, 2001, p. 235).

Lack of anxiety was found to have a positive effect on accent in a study by Guiora, Beit-Hallahmi, Brannon, Dull, and Scovel in 1972. The participants were asked to drink varying quantities of alcohol, which was seen as reducing both inhibitions and anxiety (p. 423). The authors asserted that the alcohol led to increased ego boundary permeability, which "enhanced the ability to approximate native-like pronunciation of a second language" (p. 428). Their findings imply that reduced anxiety may lead to increased ability to affiliate with other cultural groups (less adherence to a single identity), which, in turn, could aid the learner in developing a native-like L2 accent.

Power Relations, Discrimination, and L2 Accent

Schumann's Social Distance Hypothesis defines a negative learning situation as one in which the learning group is either dominant or inferior to the target language group. Either positioning of the learners will prevent their successful acquisition of the target language, as in the first case, the learners' dominance will negate any need to learn the L2, and in the second case, the learners' inferiority will limit or otherwise negatively influence their interactions with the L2 native speakers (Horwitz, 2006). Hence, power relations can play an important role in a learner's language acquisition.

In a study on ESL learners, Derwing divided the participants into "visible minorities" and those who would not stand out as different from the target language populace. She noticed that the participants belonging to a visible minority "were more likely to feel discrimination caused by accent" (2003, p. 559). Though it would be practically impossible to determine how much discrimination was due to accent and how much to race (p. 561), the fact is that these participants *felt* that it was caused by their accents. Because learners' self-confidence comes, in part, from positive experiences in the L2 (Gardner, 1985, as cited in Norton Peirce, 1995, p. 11), L2 community members' acts of discrimination against the L2 learners could negatively affect the learners' desires to integrate with the L2 community.

Furthermore, it is likely that the discrimination was a factor of the L2 native speakers' judgments of the L2 learners, rather than their language: Lippi-Green notes that people tend to judge language as representing not only the message that is being conveyed, but also the person's personality, intelligence, and other aspects of their persona (Lippi-Green, 1997, as cited in Sterling, 2000). Additionally, if the L2 group

perceives these L2 learners' language as inferior, they will also see the entire L2 learner community as inferior; as a consequence, the L2 learner group may begin to even see themselves and their language use as subordinate (Sterling, 2000). The learner's identity becomes not that of a member in the L2 community, but that of someone inferior who does not belong to the "superior" community, or the L2 culture. This social phenomenon was reflected in the case of Eva, a participant in Norton Peirce's study on ESL learners. After Eva arrived as an immigrant in Canada, whenever people treated her disrespectfully, she thought it was her own fault, "because of her own limitations" (1995, p. 24).

Discrimination, then, creates a situation in which the learner feels that he/she does not have the "right to speak," a right which Norton Peirce defines as being a part of language competence (1995, p. 18). Spolsky notes that the learner needs to be extensively exposed to the target language and given many opportunities to practice if learning is to advance (Spolsky, 1989, as cited in Norton Peirce, 1995, p. 14); when learners are seen as inferior and not worthy of being spoken to or listened to, they will have neither the chance to practice nor the opportunity to become a part of the L2 community. In such a situation, learners will not be able to affiliate with the L2 culture, and they may develop negative feelings towards the L2 speakers. As a result, they might have difficulty developing a native-like L2 accent.

On the other hand, learners may develop negative feelings towards some L2 community members and not others; consequently, they might purposefully avoid using certain varieties of their L2 in order to claim some sort of status. They may be aware that speaking with a particular accent or vocabulary leads to discrimination, or, alternately, rewards; in a study on Mexican migrant workers, Matus-Mendoza (2002) found that

members of the lower class used English words and phrases in their Spanish speech as a mechanism for social "validation," while those people who were "established members of the community" did not use English at all in their Spanish speech, even if they had the same migration experiences as the members of the lower class (p. 134). As Fernández asserts, "Hay algunos individuos cuyo deseo de identificarse con…grupos superiores en términos sociales, económicos…los lleva a tratar de imitar o adoptar la forma lingüística de más prestigio…" (Fernández, 1990, as cited in Matus-Mendoza, 2002, p. 123) ["There are certain individuals whose desire to identify with groups that are superior socially or economically leads them to imitate or adapt the most prestigious linguistic form"]. Learners' desire to become community members with a certain social position may lead them to identify with only particular groups in the L2 community, and to modify their L2 accents accordingly. Even if they already have a native-like L2 accent, their social goals may influence them in developing a native-like accent in a different variety of the L2.

Implications

Studies about passing and cultural affiliation indicate that the language learner's acquisition and behavior center largely around choices. These choices may represent the learner's desire to integrate into certain cultural groups or differentiate him/herself from those groups. Ibrahim asserts that learners in the L2 culture become a part of the "social imaginary" of that culture: members of the L2 community have created a “space or representation in which they [the learners and their L1 culture] are already constructed, imagined, and positioned” by other groups (Ibrahim, 1999, p. 353). Some learners might find that others' conceptions of them are not ideal, and may feel "pigeonholed" by the L2 cultural members (Lybeck, 2002, p. 179) or discriminated against, thus creating resistance to the L2 culture. This resistance could manifest itself in the maintenance of a foreign accent in the L2.

Similarly, these learners may be affected by the language ego; Guiora asserts that, because adults “cannot bear” to have two identities, they develop ego boundaries which prevent the development of new identities. His concept also includes the idea that pronunciation is central to one’s language identity (Guiora, 1990, as cited in Abu-Rabia & Kehat, 2004, p. 85). Thus, in his view, learners who possess strong ego boundaries cannot acquire a native-like accent in the L2 because, psychologically, their identity prevents them from doing so.

On the other hand, pressure from the L1 culture and society might influence the learner. Having a flawless (native-like) L2 accent might distance him/her from the L1 group; when it comes to L2 accent, language learners are faced with choices: "the reward of being efficient in the L2...and the cost of not marking the right identity" (Gatbonton, et

al., 2005, p. 504). By presenting the “wrong” identity via language, learners may be perceived as disloyal to their native culture, or even as pretending to be something they are not (Lybeck, 2002, p. 186). To ameliorate this, they may develop an accent that ranges from slight to heavy in order to be able to show identification with different cultural groups (Gatbonton, et al., 2005, p. 506). In this way, a learner "*selectively* manifests her [/his] membership" (Skapoulli, 2004, p. 255) in the different communities to which he/she wishes to belong. The learner’s social desires may also influence what type of L2 accent he/she develops; a learner seeking a higher social status, for example, might modify his/her L2 accent in order to gain entry into the higher class. The learner modifies his/her accent according to which groups he/she wishes to belong.

Learners who can pass as native speakers also seem to make a conscious decision about whether or not they want to pass in certain situations; one participant in Piller's study said that she liked to reveal her non-native identity so that she would not be taken as stupid when she did not understand a reference to ubiquitous L2 cultural knowledge (2002, p. 195). Similarly, Abu-Rabia and Kehat found in their study that one participant liked to emphasize her foreign accent whenever she made a grammatical mistake in order to prevent people from criticizing her “too severely” (2004, p. 89). Such identity choices may be linked to language anxiety, as learners who experience anxiety may not be able to pass in all situations, so they compensate for it by emphasizing their foreign identity. Finally, they may not be able to develop a native-like accent at all due to the affective block that anxiety can create.

However, some L2 speakers choose to reveal their foreign identities not because of anxiety or embarrassment about errors, but because in passing, they negate their

achievement in the L2 (since no one knows the language is, in fact, their second) and also perhaps the quality of being different or interesting (Piller, 2002, p. 194). Their accent can identify them as a member of a particular community and also an “interesting” individual. Therefore, L2 learners may manipulate their L2 accent in order to obtain the most "social rewards" (Pavlenko and Blackledge, 2004, as cited in Gatbonton, et al., 2005, p. 507).

An example of these social rewards is evident in the Mexican TV program "Gringo en México," which follows an American man as he travels throughout Mexico, narrating his adventures in what could be considered heavily-accented Spanish. Whether or not the host, Robert Alexander, actually possesses a native-like Spanish accent (off-camera) becomes irrelevant in the context of his show. Though official statistics on the success of the show do not exist, multiple Mexican government web pages mention the program as a boost for regional tourism, and at least one forum about it exists. No doubt one of the attractions of the show is Alexander's Spanish accent; when discussing how the program came to be, he even says that part of its purpose was to promote tourism as narrated by a "gringo que hablaba (con su acento) el español" [American that spoke Spanish with his American accent] (Bloggercf, 2007). He is aware that his accent marks him as an American, and beyond that, he uses it to his benefit. His case serves as a clear example of how L2 learners can manipulate their accents in order to modify their perceived ethnic affiliation and cultural identity, and to gain social status.

A final issue in cultural identity is that of physical factors which affect perception of identity. Ibrahim included dress as a marker of identity (1999, p. 350), and in her self-study, Marx noted that when she began to pass as a German native speaker, she was also

dressing, in her view, as Germans do (2002, p. 272). Similarly, Derwing (2003) looked at the learning experiences of visible minorities. All of these situations imply that physical appearance may play a part in language acquisition and the ability to become a member of a new community.

If a person feels that he/she is discriminated against by the L2 speakers due to his/her skin color or appearance, it may be more difficult for that person to identify with the L2 community. If he/she notices that his/her physical features always highlight his/her foreign identity, the learner may feel that acquiring a native-like accent is useless, especially if the L2 community members mark him/her as foreign even when he/she has never spoken with them.

On the other hand, if modes of dressing can affect people's perceptions of a learner's identity, then visible minority status could be overcome simply by wearing clothes or styles similar to those of the L2 community members. In such a case, the learner might desire to develop a native-like accent in order to be able to fully pass as a member of the L2 community, since he/she is already close to passing simply due to his/her dress. Thus, appearances can also play a part in cultural identification and accent acquisition.

Teaching Implications

Though a teacher can never force his/her students to adapt certain attitudes or outlooks on the L2 language and culture, there are measures that could be taken in the classroom in order to promote more native-like accent acquisition in the L2. One of the first steps would be to guide the students in analyzing their own culture(s) and viewpoints; as Omaggio Hadley notes, "significant cross-cultural understanding can only begin to happen when students become aware that their own view of the world is culturally bound" (2001, p. 383). If language learners do not understand that their own culture(s) is neither global nor "right," they can never evaluate the L2 culture without judgment. Thus, analytical activities which encourage the students to reflect on themselves and the L1 culture would be extremely important in promoting L2 cultural understanding. As Wenger states, teachers must take into account the communities to which the learners see themselves as belonging, as well as those to which they would like to belong, and likewise encourage them to think of themselves as belonging to multiple communities (Wenger, 1998, as cited in Norton, 2001, p. 170). Students should be given opportunities to reflect on both their L1 cultural backgrounds and with whom they identify and *would like* to identify.

Beyond this first step, the teacher could promote the development of relationships with native L2 speakers. This could be done via the introduction of a pen-pal (or email) program, or, in the case of language studies which take place in the target country, the teacher might arrange a language exchange with native speakers. This type of interaction could be encouraged with multiple members of the L2 community in order to prevent the learner's stereotyping or rejection of the culture (if, for example, the learner did not get

along well with his/her first pen-pal, etc). In this way, students might begin to create a social network with which they could actively use their L2 and also begin to participate in the L2 community.

The language teacher could similarly introduce the students to various aspects of the target culture by using realia. He/she might bring in music, popular TV shows, information on proverbs, etc, with the aim of getting each student to find something of personal interest in the L2 culture. Research projects could also be encouraged for the same reason, and to ensure that the students develop more in-depth knowledge about the L2. Such projects could be undertaken with L2 native speakers so as to corroborate and expand facts; after all, the students' use of only information (as opposed to cultural interactions and experiences) could lead to stereotyping (Omaggio Hadley, 2001, p. 347). By developing their cultural knowledge, the students would have the chance to develop awareness of L2 community practices as well as variants of the L2 and their significance within the community.

While teaching culture could help to develop the socio-cultural knowledge and, possibly, even the integrative motivation that aid in accent formation, the teacher should also encourage the students to use the L2 as much as possible and to reduce their use of the L1. In this way the learners might more effectively modify the “gestural representations” (of the mouth) which are necessary to produce the L2 sounds (Borden, 1980, as cited in Reeder, 1998, p. 103), more so than if the learner were using the L1 very frequently. This practice might also be coupled with pronunciation instruction; learners must have an awareness of the differences between L1 and L2 sounds. Otherwise, if they perceive the sounds as belonging to the same sound category when, in fact, they do not,

then their L2 pronunciation accuracy could be reduced (Flege, 1995, as cited in Reeder, 1998, p. 102).

Zukowski-Faust suggests that, because interactions with different cultures and communities may involve conflicts for the learner, the teacher should try to instruct the students in both recognizing and resolving conflicts. Similarly, students should be taught how to speak politely and show caring in the L2, which might also help them to avoid conflictual situations with L2 native speakers or "new" cultural contexts (Zukowski-Faust, 1997).

One of the conflictual situations in which learners could find themselves is that of L2 speakers discriminating against them or otherwise treating them as inferior. Norton Peirce suggests that learners have discussions in class or keep diaries in which they reflect on their interactions with native speakers so that they can begin to understand how power relations are implicit in social interactions (1995, p. 27). Thinking about their experiences with L2 speakers may help them to avoid feeling powerless; Norton Peirce reports that, over time, Eva, a participant in her study who felt inferior to L2 native speakers, became aware of ways in which she could "challenge and transform social practices of marginalization" (1995, p. 25). The ability to challenge discriminatory social customs and resolve conflicts could give learners more practice opportunities with native speakers and the chance to integrate themselves into the L2 community, possibly allowing for more native-like L2 accent development.

Orisinilandri (2005) asserted that marginalization might serve as motivation for some learners to better learn the L2 and achieve a higher status in the L2 community. In her view, the learners' ability to communicate in the L2 would help them to negotiate

their place in society and give them access to power relations in the L2 community: "When the language is no longer a problem, communication will be effective and people can talk their way through to opportunities and to more social power" (Contribution section, para. 6). Though competence in a language certainly helps learners to negotiate within the L2 community, the motivation to learn a language in order to achieve a better status and to avoid discrimination is more instrumental than integrative; therefore, that type of motivation may not be as conducive as integrative motivation to acquiring a native-like L2 accent, unless the learner's intent is to be recognized as a member of the L2 community.

Finally, despite a teacher's best efforts, when the students are actively and independently in the L2 community their accent development is largely a factor of personal choice. Learners choose which communities they associate with, which language they use most frequently, how much interaction they have with native speakers, and how they respond to challenges to their identities. Ultimately, their L2 accents may be entirely in their hands.

Conclusion

Learning a foreign language involves a myriad of different factors. Pronunciation is just one of many indicators of proficiency. Though it may not always affect native speakers' understanding of the learner (Munro & Derwing, 1995, p. 90), it is, in fact, quite important if the learner seeks to fit in with the L2 cultural group.

Ethnic group affiliation and cultural identity may play an important role in accent acquisition. Learners can consciously choose to change their L2 or even L1 accents in order to represent a new identity and to participate in a different community. New identities can be transmitted via pronunciation because learners (and possibly other listeners) take L2 accent as an indication of a person's ethnic group affiliation. Learners can change their identities via their cultural participation (or non-participation) and accent development (or lack thereof); as Wenger asserts, "we not only produce our identities through the practices we engage in, but we also define ourselves through the practices we do not engage in. Our identities are constituted not only by what we are but also by what we are not" (Wenger, 1998, as cited in Norton, 2001, p. 163).

A foreign accent or its absence is then partly a factor of learners' cultural identity. In the case of achieving a native/like accent, a learner may need to feel a sense of belonging in the L2 culture, and not partake in ethnocentrism, which is defined as the tendency to distinguish between "we" and "they," with "they" being judged more negatively (Kalin and Berry, 1994, as cited in Gatbonton & Hinenoya, 2000, p. 226). Learners who find that they prefer to be part of the L1 "we" may not develop native-like accents, particularly if they frequently use their L1. As Ibrahim asserts, "one invests where one sees oneself mirrored" (1999, p. 365), and if the learner sees no connection

between him/herself and the L2 culture, or feels that the L2 culture rejects him/her, he/she might find no reason to invest in the culture by developing a native-like L2 accent. Acquiring an accent that is conducive to passing as a native speaker is only profitable for those learners who see a reason to do so; they must see something in the culture that makes them want to fit in and to be a part of it. If the learner never identifies in any way with the L2 culture, then perhaps he/she will never acquire a native-like accent.

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VITA

Rebecca Pertida Lammons was born in Houston, Texas. After graduating from the High School for the Performing and Visual Arts, Houston, Texas, she entered Oberlin College in Oberlin, Ohio. She received a Bachelor of Arts from Oberlin College in December 2005. For the next year she worked as an English teacher in Puebla, Mexico. In August 2006, she entered the Graduate School at the University of Texas at Austin. She studied for a year there, then resumed teaching in Puebla, Mexico. In 2009 she returned to the Graduate School at the University of Texas at Austin to complete her studies.

Permanent Address: 524 E. 28th St.

Houston, TX, 77008

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